

Researching Language Aspects' Preferences of English Department Students When Learning Culture

(A Case Study of Students Taking a Course called *Introductory to British Studies* at Jenderal Soedirman University)

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Abstract: Communicating in English covers two aspects: 'system' referring to syntactic and semantics elements; and 'schemata' referring to appropriateness based on the social cultural contexts of native speakers. It is, therefore, very essential to teach cultural aspects when teaching English as a foreign language. This article describes a survey to investigate students' opinions on which cultural aspects that should be learned.

Key words: culture, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

The teaching of EFL cannot ignore cultural elements, particularly those of the Anglo-Saxon countries where people speak English as their native language. The concept of target-language culture has been advocated for being taught to students in EFL settings, such as for English Department students in Indonesia. However, in Indonesia some people still think that learning EFL has to be separated from learning its culture (Rochman, 2002). This is due to the fact that some elements of English culture are not in accordance with - even contradict to - the local values (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984). Meanwhile, language uses, as Prodomou (1992) states, actually reflect their culture so it is impossible to disassociate them in any real sense. Therefore, the cross-cultural matters in language teaching may become a potential conflict in EFL teaching.

The harmony between the culture-specific aspects of English and the local values often undergoes a kind of conflict when one begins to learn EFL (Alptekin, 1993). A student of EFL who has never experienced in the target-language culture will most likely encounter problems in processing English systemic data of unfamiliar contexts, for instance 'pub' for

Indonesian students. Pub is normally used in the mind of the native-speaker of English as a place for socializing. The natural tendency for the Indonesian students is to access the meaning of this word by respecting to their own cultural system. As a result, it is possible that students will react to the pub context with less than full comprehension; even it may contradict to the real meaning as they may think that pub is a bad place where people get drunk. Wallace (1988) attributes this problem as the lack of 'cultural competence', i.e. a very complex package of beliefs, knowledge, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours of the target culture.

Naturally, students of EFL make use of culture-specific schemas in relating input to what they already know, and to construct the target language meaning (Alptekin, 1993). Hyde (1994) warns that students in an EFL situation might feel learning the target language to be hard and frustrating experience when the relevant cultural background assumptions are missing. Thus, culture plays a major role in the learning process, which in turn significantly affects comprehension and interpretation of the target language.

Language has no function independently of the social contexts in which it is used (Askadou et.al., 1990). In the case of EFL, such contexts are various as there are numerous English-speaking countries in the world. Similarly, the schematic knowledge of the speakers of such contexts is quite diverse. Hence, to confine English to one of its native setting and to present that setting in a stereotypical manner is not possible. Consequently, EFL learners are likely to find themselves difficult in tackling unfamiliar information when coping with systemic data to an appropriate target language culture (Alptekin, 1993).

To build conceptual comprehension between the culturally familiar aspects and the unfamiliar ones is essential (Fairclough, 1992). This can be built, through the use of comparisons as techniques of cross-cultural comprehension, or the exploitation of universal concepts of human experience as reference points for the interpretation of unfamiliar data.

The cultural content of teaching English as a foreign language is very important. In the context of English as a second language, for instance in the United States, students may be seeking to become integrated into the life of the community.

In the context of EFL, like in Turkey, Cem and Margaret Alptekin (1984) observe that local culture may be submerged into the dominant culture of the foreign language. In relation to the EFL contexts, Rampton

(1990) explains that no-one involved in teaching English is likely to argue for cross-cultural miss-understanding, however some may question the relative emphasis to be given to cross-cultural as opposed to target or local culture components in a course design.

Robinson (1985) believes in the importance of developing cultural understanding of English in EFL contexts to help students meet their need when practise in the real situation. Courses in cultural studies do not usually build bridges between the local and target culture. Traditionally, students are asked to role-play and imitate the target culture situations rather than synthesise them with their own experience.

In the communicative language teaching of EFL, cross-cultural content is not given explicitly because it is usually integrated in the teaching materials (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Culture involves socially acquired knowledge that is organized in culture-specific ways, so it plays a central role in acquiring of the target language (Kachru, 1985). In line with the cultural elements in EFL teaching, Widdowson (1990) refers to socially acquired knowledge as schematic knowledge, which he contrasts with systemic knowledge. The systemic is defined as the knowledge of the formal properties of language involving both its semantic and syntactic systems.

However, Widdowson (1990) reminds that in foreign language learning, the schematic process is quite different from the mother tongue one. Normally, ones will associate their schematic knowledge with their own cultural perspective. For example, a child from the English-speaking world will generally think of a dog as man's best friend, while Indonesian children, especially the Muslim ones, are likely to perceive it as a dangerous and dirty. This is a natural way for an EFL student when he/she confronts uses of the foreign language with unfamiliar concepts, he/she will interpret them in reference to this established association, i.e. his/her native culture.

In designing activities for teaching culture, it is important to consider the purpose for activities and its usefulness in EFL contexts. As a matter of fact, Haddley (2001) adds that the study of culture involves time that many teachers do not feel they can spare in a curriculum. Besides that, many teachers are afraid of teaching culture because they fear that they do not know enough about it. Therefore, it can be said that teaching culture has become a challenge for teachers of EFL.

METHODOLOGY

This research focused on the investigation of students' views in that regard to their improvement in cultural understanding when learning English in EFL context. The respondents were students of English Diploma III Programme in Jenderal Soedirman University. Based on the curriculum of that programme, it was stated that there were two compulsory cultural studies that students must undertake, i.e., Introductory to British Studies (*Pengantar Kebudayaan Inggris*), and Introductory to American Studies (*Pengantar Kebudayaan Amerika*). These subjects were taught independently from an integrative fashion within the teaching of language skills.

The teaching of these two subjects was aimed at enhancing students' understanding of the chief factors in values and attitudes of the target culture when learning EFL. Culture itself is an information system which is more than what students must learn in order to be able to function acceptably as members of a social group. Attitudes, values, belief, and views, which are collectively referred to as 'culture', will play an unquestioned role in learning EFL.

There were two hundred eighty seven respondents consisted of one hundred eighty nine females and ninety eight males. Most of them were students of the first year, taking the course called 'Introductory to British Studies'. Ninety-seven per cent of the respondents were the sophomores, while the others were the students of the second year, i.e., two per cent, and third year, i.e. one per cent. Respondents were distributed into six parallel classes.

The data were collected from the questionnaires distributed to the respondents. The questionnaires were written in Indonesian to avoid any misunderstanding and designed using open-ended questions. Respondents completed the questions covering aspects of English culture that should be learned. The students were asked three main questions similar to the ones that Prodomou (1992) summarized on cultural content of approaches to EFL. In general, the questions are as follows:

1. Which model of English do students wish to learn: British /American /others? Why?
2. Is it important for students to speak English like a native-speaker? Why?

3. What do students think the content or subject matter of their cultural studies courses should be? a) History; b) Geography; c) National Identity; d) Education; e) The people; f) Multiculturalism; g) The government; h) Media; i) Arts and Literature; j) Science and Technology; k) Gender Issues; l) Pop culture; m) Economy; n) Tourism; o) Sports; p) Politics; and q) Others.

The primary concern of this survey is on the matter of cultural aspects, especially regarding to which models of English that students wish to learn, the importance of speaking like a native-speaker, and content or subject matters of cultural studies. These three aspects can become sources of information in examining the content of cultural studies that the students need and interested in learning.

When doing an analysis of cultural aspects, it should be remembered that there are two categories of values that become a base for learning a culture, namely “intrinsic” and “instrumental” values. The intrinsic values are those upheld regardless of the benefits. In contrast, a value is instrumental when it is directly beneficial.

The teachers need to know factors that cultural areas of English are generally dominant based on the students’ views. It will be used as a foundation for planning the contents of the cultural studies so that this can enhance students’ motivation when learning EFL.

The purpose of asking the first two questions explained above was to elicit how students felt about native-speaker models of English that they wanted to learn. A preferred model of English could be used as an indicator for a favouritism of English styles amongst the students. This question was aimed at finding out the students’ preferences on which model of cultural aspects that students are interested in. Students responded to the questions and they wrote the reasons for their answers.

As already been explained, the intrinsic motivation in speaking English can be an advantageous value for students. The students were asked if they would prefer speaking like a native speaker when learning EFL. The answers could be written either in English or Indonesian.

The final question aimed to discover students’ opinions to specify the kind of content of cultural study courses. Contents of cultural studies could increase the students’ curiosity in learning the language. Respondents chose the culturally-based topics they were interested in by ticking them. To accommodate respondents’ opinions on the culturally-based topics that were not listed, respondents could write other preferred topics in the spaces provided.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis on the English model that respondents were willing to learn shows a popularity of British and American English. It can be seen from Table 1 below. Forty-eight point one per cent of the respondents chose British English as the style that they preferred, while thirty-five point five per cent of them preferred American English. This result must surely be a reflection of well known traditional styles of those two English mainstreams in Indonesia. Interestingly, sixteen point four per cent of the respondents preferred to learn Australian English. This finding suggests that there is another English style preferred by students in this research.

Table 1. Mainstream English

No	Mainstreams	Percentage
1.	British English	48.1%
2.	American English	35.5%
3.	Australian English	16.4%

The reasons for choosing the British English as a model are generalized into three categories. First, many respondents state that English comes from Britain, so they say that the 'pure' English must be the British English. Second, historically American people were from Britain and they think that the American English is derived from the British English. Consequently, if they want to learn the real English, they should use British English. The third category is for various reasons, such as spelling system; books, technology; public figures; films; royal family; fashion; and sports. Therefore, respondents preferred the British English because of the thinking of original English.

Respondents preferred American English as the model of their English for some reasons. Most respondents mention that the USA is a powerful country in military, economics, and technology, so that it is necessary for them to learn the American English. The other reason is that it is easy for them to learn American English as there are many American films on TV or VCD. Many American songs are popular in Indonesia so the use of American English sounds familiar to the respondents. The other reason for the respondents to prefer the American English is because of the American image. Respondents think that the USA symbolizes a modern, prestigious and rich country, democracy, and hi-tech products.

Respondents who preferred Australian English as a model for their English learning were not as many as those choosing the British and American English. Most respondents state that Australia and Indonesia are neighbouring countries so it is important for them to learn Australian English. Another reason is the grants from the Australian government to Indonesia. Some respondents also anticipate a good perspective economic relationship between Indonesia and Australia so that they have to master the Australian English.

In relation to the answers of the second question, whether the respondents think that speaking English like a native speaker is important or not, Table 2 shows that most respondents (86.6%) say that they would like to speak English like a native-speaker.

Table 2. Speaking English like a Native Speaker

No	Statements	Percentage
1.	Speaking like a native-speaker	86.6%
2.	Not speaking like a native speaker	13.4%

From Table 2 above, it can also be seen that thirteen point four per cent of them thought that it was not important for them to be like a native-speaker when learning English. Respondents think that because they take English as their main subject they must be able to master English as perfectly as possible. The rest of the respondents say that it is difficult for them to be like a native-speaker as the exposure to the target language is limited. They say that they have tried very hard but still they have the Indonesian or Javanese accent so they think it will be useless to learn the native accents.

In answering the third question on which cultural subjects they like to study, around two-thirds of the students wanted to learn the History as one of those cultural aspects. Apart from that, they also thought that the geography of the English-speaking country was one of the important aspects to learn. In relation to this, many respondents, i.e. sixty-one point eight per cent, also stated that they needed to learn about the national identity of the English-speaking countries.

Table 3. Aspects of Culture to Learn

No	Cultural Aspects	Percentage of Student's Preferences out of 100%
1.	People of the English speaking countries	93.1%
2.	Science and Technology	89.9%
3.	Economics	85.7%
4.	Educational system	70.7%
5.	Pop culture	67.2%
6.	History	66.6%
7.	Governmental system	65.5%
8.	Geography	64.8%
9.	Tourism	63.4%
10.	National identity	61.8%
11.	Arts and literature	59.9%
12.	Media	16.1%
13.	Multiculturalism	11.1%
14.	Gender	9.8%

Educational system and the people of the English-speaking countries also rated quite high number, i.e. seventy point seven per cent and ninety-three point one per cent. However, respondents believed that the topic of multiculturalism in English-speaking countries was not that essential as can be seen from the respondents' choice, i.e. only eleven point one per cent.

Respondents were interested in the governmental system of English-speaking countries (i.e. sixty-five point five per cent), and arts and literature issues (i.e. fifty-nine point nine per cent). However, they did seem to be interested in the media in which only sixteen point one per cent nominated this issue.

The interest in science and technology revealed to be a high priority for the content of cultural studies eight-nine point nine per cent of the respondents chose this issue. Beside that, sixty-five point two per cent of the respondents thought that pop culture should also be for a primary concern. This finding is also similar to the economic and tourism issues that rated eighty-five point seven per cent and sixty-three point four per cent.

In contrast, respondents thought that gender issue did not play a significant role for learning English culture as only nine point eight per cent respondents nominated it. Other topics that had quite strong interest for respondents to learn were in sports and politics. Students chose sports as one of the topic rated thirty-one point one per cent, while those chose politics rated thirty-three point eight per cent. Very few students added topics that were of their interests such as health (zero point three per cent), sex (one point one per cent) and agriculture (zero point three per cent).

Table 4. Other Contents of Cultural Aspects

No	Cultural Aspects	Percentage of Student's Preferences out of 100%
1.	Politics	33.8%
2.	Sports	31.8%
3.	Sex	1.1%
4.	Health	0.3%
5.	Agriculture	0.3%

Knowledge of the target culture remains an important part of language learning. Brown (1990) explains that training students to infer culturally-determined meanings is particularly valuable for advanced students who have to deal with authentic materials. The target culture, however, should be integrated with the other work done by the class.

It is the fact that the more advanced the students' knowledge of English becomes, the more receptive they are to interesting content and a richer cultural input. A great deal has to be conducted to incorporate into course design content based on the learners' personal interests.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

It can be concluded that on the cultural aspects regarding to the English styles preferred by students in this research are British, American, and Australian English. When learning English, most students of this survey want to be like a native speaker of English. In relation to the cultural aspects of English, most students want to learn the history, geography, national identity, educational system, people, governmental system, science and technology, pop culture, economic and tourism, sports and politics.

It is suggested that students learning EFL have to broaden their horizons by preparing the Anglo-Saxon cultural systems. Consequently, when teaching EFL, students should be taught cultural aspects of the target language.

The content of the cultural aspects could be discovered from the students' interests to stimulate them in developing their 'cultural competence'. Translating students' needs into objectives requires moving from problems finding to problem solving. Based on the andragogical approach, students in the cultural studies subjects can participate in choosing and planning activities.

In teaching cultural studies, a selection has to be made from the mass of possible subject matter. Criteria for the selection should include goals for the students to achieve. Furthermore, these goals have to be realistic because failure to select criteria clearly will result in wasted effort to teach cultural studies.

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